

# Who's Indie Now?

*Classifying indie in the games industry*

Master Thesis

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## **Abstract**

To state that indie in the games industry signifies an independent developer is too simple. Indie is no longer *only* a question whether a developer is developing independent from a publisher or not. In this thesis I argue that games (and its developers) are classified as indie through an interplay between: the developers (through examining the context of production), the audience (by criticizing games on their authenticity and using indie as an identification tool), and the publishers (through making indie a new market segment) in the games industry. The result is an overview of the indie games industry and how indie is classified there. The indie games industry has become a bigger and bigger part of the greater games industry. The once clear line, that separated indie from mainstream in the games industry, has become blurred.

## **Keywords**

Indie games, mainstream games, authenticity, game developers, game publishers, games industry

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## **Acknowledgements**

As I am writing these first words you are reading now, I am close to finishing my master thesis. What I really would like to do now is to start up my (gaming) computer and play a well-deserved game of StarCraft II. Before I am going to do that, however, I would like to thank: my tutor prof. dr. Joost Raessens for his guidance during my thesis, my parents for supporting me all of these years, and, of course, Roos, for putting up with a boyfriend who likes StarCraft II almost as much as his girlfriend.

Niels Hoogendoorn – Amsterdam, 2014

## Introduction

At this years Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) conference, Sony and Microsoft introduced their new gaming systems. Sony showed the PlayStation 4, while Microsoft revealed the Xbox One. The E3 is one of the most prominent platforms where these companies could present their new systems and where the press could make or break their new products. The Xbox One was not well received. Microsoft's new gaming system was criticized for having more restrictions than its predecessor (and the PlayStation 4). For example: players are forced to be connected to the Internet and could not exchange games with their friends. The system was more of a media system than a gaming system, which did not bode well with the more hardcore gamers. It was mainly designed for casual gamers<sup>1</sup>. The PlayStation 4 on the other hand, did not force their users to be online all the time, games could easily be exchanged<sup>2</sup>, the PlayStation 4 would cost \$100 less than the Xbox One and was slightly more technological advanced. Kotaku, one of the worlds leading game news websites, and other gaming press declared Sony a clear winner in this battle<sup>3</sup>.

Sony, a console manufacturer and (although to a lesser extent) game publisher, gave much attention to *indie developers*<sup>4</sup>. In the middle of their presentation they invited eight indie developers on stage to show their new games (which of course were designed for the PlayStation 4)<sup>5</sup>. Sony wanted to make it clear that they care about the indie audience and tries to make it easy for the indie developers to self publish<sup>6</sup> their games in the Sony PlayStation Store. Microsoft did not give as much attention to the indie audience as Sony did by far. There was no room for indie games and indie developers could not self publish their games. In fact, if an indie developer wanted to publish their game on Xbox Live Arcade (the online store for Xbox games), they were required to have been

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<sup>1</sup> Game scholar Jesper Juul defines (stereotypical) hardcore gamers as gamers who have played 'a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games.' (Juul, 2010: p. 8) A casual gamer is the opposite of this: the stereotypical casual player has 'a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games.' (Juul, 2010: p. 8) The hardcore gamers are more committed to playing video games.

<sup>2</sup> As Sony, as a jab towards Microsoft, explained in this short video clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWSIFh8ICaA>

<sup>3</sup> Kotaku's article on declaring Sony the winner: <http://kotaku.com/sony-just-smacked-the-xbox-one-in-the-mouth-512492046>

<sup>4</sup> Indie stems from the word independent. In this article Sony elaborates on the new indie games for the PlayStation: <http://blog.us.playstation.com/2013/06/10/e3-2013-indie-developers-continue-to-choose-playstation/>

<sup>5</sup> In this YouTube video you can see Sony showcasing the indie games at the E3:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVL6KCK4ES4>

<sup>6</sup> Self publishing here means to publish games to a platform without the requirement of a publisher.

signed to a publisher, who would have to publish it for them. In this case, the indie developers have to give up his status of independence in order to publish their games. These different approaches to the indie audience were another thing the press used to praise Sony and criticize Microsoft<sup>7</sup>. Sony made a well thought through business decision to include the indie developers in their presentation. To even further show their connection with the indie audience, Sony presented a new category of games in the PlayStation Store: indie games<sup>8</sup>. They effectively used the indie audience as a marketing tool for the PlayStation 4 (and the rest of the PlayStation brand: the PlayStation 3 and the PlayStation Vita, for example). During this presentation I noticed in the chat box of the live stream, that the audience could not decide whether the presented games could be regarded as *indie* or not. The question of what indie meant could be raised: does it mean *independent from a publisher* or *games with certain features*? And who decides this? The developers, the audience, or the publishers? Different people in the chat box had different criteria for labeling a company or game as indie. Sony has for example financed the game *Journey*<sup>9</sup> (Thatgamecompany, 2012), making the company not strictly independent and thus, for some people, not indie. For others, it was not so much the status of an independent developer that labeled a game as indie, but certain features (for example: certain stylistic features) a game should possess. While watching the online stream and following the chat dialogue, I noticed that there were three groups that classify if something is indie: the developers, the publishers, and the audience<sup>10</sup>.

I find it interesting, from an academic perspective, to see indie categorized as a type of game. The origin of indie in the games industry, originated with developers operating independent from a publisher (Lipkin, 2011: p. 8). It is a term that ascribes a certain type of development to the developer (Martin, Deuze, 2003: p. 277).

However, indie as a genre of games now also implies certain elements to a game, with no regard to the developer per se. It now also signifies a genre or style (Lipkin, 2012: p.8). In other media, in the music industry for example, this is longer apparent. Indie rock has become a term to describe a certain style of music and is also being labeled as a genre (Hibbett, 2005: p. 58). The indie culture surrounding the concept of indie seems to be a matter of *provenance* (Simon, 2011: p. 3) and *authenticity* (Auslander, 1998). The distinction between indie as *high art* versus not-indie as

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<sup>7</sup> Kotaku, for example, published an article on this subject: <http://kotaku.com/indie-developers-won-t-be-able-to-self-publish-on-xbox-509271999>

<sup>8</sup> The article in which Sony presented the new category can be found here: <http://blog.us.playstation.com/2013/05/07/new-indie-games-category-on-playstation-store/>

<sup>9</sup> This game was not presented during the E3, but is used here as an example.

<sup>10</sup> The audience, in this thesis, refers to the collection of gamers, academics, and journalists in the games industry.

*popular media*, can be used by people to differentiate themselves from other people (Newman, Levine, 2012).

With the growing interest from publishers, indie as a culture has become commodified (Kline et al., 2003). Publishers see the indie genre as a new market segment. The mode of production is not that important anymore (Whitson, 2012). There certainly are developers tied to a studio or publisher<sup>11</sup> who are regarded as creators of indie games. EA Games, one of the biggest games publishers, released their *Indie Bundle*: a collection of games, made by different developers, but under contract of EA Games. By definition, these developers are not independent, and thus not indie in the original meaning of the term, but the games do carry certain stylistic elements by which they were categorized and then marketed under indie.

The decision of what or who is indie does not lie anymore with a type of development (independent from a publisher), but has also become an identification tool for the audience and a term for a market segment for publishers. As the example in the previous paragraph makes clear, it seems that there no longer is a clear line between what is indie and what is not (a developer either develops independent from a publisher or not). It appears to have become an interplay between developers, audience, and publishers. Each force in this interplay classifies games as indie in its own manner, which would result in a dynamic concept of indie. The once clear division line seems blurred.

### *Research Question*

In this thesis I try to answer the following research question: *which forces classify what indie is in the games industry and how do they do that?* The word *forces* in this question means: developers, publishers, and the audience. They form three circuits that operate within an overall market circuit (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 50).

### *Sub-questions*

To answer the research question, I will use four sub-questions (which each will be answered in their own chapter): what does indie mean in the contemporary games industry? How do indie

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<sup>11</sup> For example: Thatgamecompany made the game acclaimed indie game *Journey*, while under contract by Sony. They were not independent (at that time) but *Journey* was still regarded as an indie game as is shown here on a Indie game blog: [http://indiegames.com/2012/03/thatgamecompany\\_releases\\_journ.html](http://indiegames.com/2012/03/thatgamecompany_releases_journ.html)

developers position themselves as indie in the games industry? How does the audience classify games or their developers as indie? How do game publishers market media products as indie?

### *Method*

I see the process of classifying media products as indie as a negotiation process between the audience, developers, and publishers. The audience uses indie as something to identify themselves with and to differentiate themselves from others, the very difference between independent developers and not-independent developers, in a traditional sense, is a struggle for independence from publishers for the indie developers. However, big publishers are now also using indie as a marketing tool. The power to call a media product indie is not exclusively bound to (indie) developers. This negotiation process is the main subject of this thesis. This means that this thesis will not be about researching the ontology of an indie game, but will rather be about how the audience, developers, and publishers classify what is indie in the games industry. As this thesis will show, there are many definitions of what it means if something is classified as indie. It seems practically impossible to produce a fixed definition of an indie game. Therefore I think that it is much more useful to focus on *which* forces classify games as indie and *how* they do that.

To research this, I will need a method. In *Studying Contemporary American Film*, Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland define *method* as procedural knowledge (2012: p. 6). The method provides the tools and the structure for, in their case, film analysis. In the case of this thesis: explaining a method is explaining the structure to answer the research question. This thesis will be a Critical Media Analysis of the indie games industry. According to Stocchetti and Kukkonen (2011), academic researchers at the University of Applied Sciences in Helsinki, 'Critical Media Analysis means thinking critically about the impact of the media on the distribution of power in society.' (Stocchetti, Kukkonen, 2011: p. 15) Distribution of power refers to 'the negotiation processes about power, also called "politics", and its strategies of domination and subversion in society. The critical analysis of the media therefore looks at the nature and agendas of media power and social knowledge.' (Stocchetti, Kukkonen, 2011: p. 15) This is the method Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter used in *Digital Play* (2003). In this book, these media scholars analyzed (through Critical Media Analysis) how the games industry became the industry it was in 2003. Using Critical Media Analysis, Kline et al. combine a mixture of concepts and perspectives of the disciplines of media theory, political economy of communication, and cultural studies for analyzing interactive gaming (Kline et al., 2003: p. 27). The media scholars argue that 'critical media



analysis must take account of the dialectical interplay of technologies, culture, and economics.’ (Kline et al., 2003: p. 28)

To reveal the dialectical interplay, Kline et al. propose ‘a systematic map of the techno-cultural-capitalist matrix that we [the scholars] call the “mediatized global marketplace.” We [the scholars] present diagrams of the interplay between what we [the scholars] call the “three circuits”: the circuit of culture, the circuit of technology, and the circuit of marketing. They represent a framework for critical media analysis that can guide a more careful general reading of the epochal restructuring of the market economy and, more specifically, illuminate the nature of digital play.’ (Kline et al., 2003: p. 28) As the subject of *Digital Play* was the games industry in general (with no special regard for the indie games industry), I will focus on the indie games industry specifically, while using the same framework. In this manner I will reveal the interplay between the audience (circuit of culture in chapter two), the developers (circuit of technology in chapter three), and the publishers (circuit of marketing in chapter four) through analyzing different perspectives, concepts, and theories.

Using this method, I will observe the indie games industry from a theoretical perspective, using academic theories, without doing quantitative field research. In other words, I use a qualitative research method. This means that I will not conduct interviews, for example, which would have been done in a more quantitative approach. Consequently, this means that the developers, publishers, and audience of the games industry will not get their points of view heard directly, but only through academic theories.

### *Theory*

Media theories, according to Stocchetti and Kukkonen, ‘are constellations of concepts, and they work as tools for our critical thinking. Different media theories identify different issues in the media.’ (2011: p. 11) According to Elsaesser and Buckland, the aim of theory (in their case for studying film) ‘is to construct different conceptual perspectives on a film, each informed by a specific set of values.’ (2012, p. 5) A theory lets the researcher study an object from a perspective containing certain values. For this thesis I will use theories containing concepts and perspective about the negotiation processes of power in classifying indie. Which forces classify what media as indie and how do they do that?

Kline et al. analyze the games industry as an interplay between media theory, cultural studies, and political economy, which creates a multidimensional theoretical framework. I will

argue in this thesis that the classification of something as indie is a product of this interplay. This thesis will focus on the indie games industry, while using the multidimensional framework used by Kline et al. I will combine media theories, political economy theories, and theories from cultural studies, to research how the forces in the different circuits (proposed by Kline et al.) classify something as indie in the indie games industry.

For the three subcircuits (technology, culture and marketing) to work, Kline et al. posit an overarching circuit: The circuit of capital. This circuit is a process ‘in which corporate production creates commodities for consumption for purchase, which in turn generates the flow of money and profits to start the cycle over again.’ (Kline et al., 2003: p. 50) The flow of capital through these phases is the fuel for the three subcircuits.

I will use Chase Bowen Martin and Mark Deuze’s concepts and perspectives from “The independent production of culture” (2009) as the main thread of the chapter about the circuit of technology. These concepts and perspectives complement Kline et al.’s notion of the circuit of technology; Kline et al. give the structure for researching the circuit of technology in the games industry, while Martin and Deuze focus on indie game development in the games industry. Martin and Deuze focus on the development and technological side of the indie games industry and structure their research into five chapters: technology, laws and regulations, industrial and organizational structures, occupational careers, and markets. However, I will use their chapter *markets* in the chapter about the circuit of marketing. The scholars argue that the indie games industry has become part of the *greater games industry*.

For the circuit of culture, I will research how Bourdieu’s notion of *taste* (Bourdieu, 1983) and high art versus popular culture (Hibbett, 2006) applies to indie culture. An important aspect I involve in this chapter is Auslander’s notion of authenticity (Auslander, 1998) and its importance for classifying games as indie.

The commodification is an important aspect in the circuit of marketing. I will use the theories of Kline et al. (2003) to research how indie as a culture is being commodified. Because indie has no fixed definition, the term can be used as a genre, which can be exploited by publishers. Therefore, the mode of production of an indie game is becoming less and less important for the game to be considered as indie. Publishers can create a *manufactured authenticity* (Jones, et al., 2005) and use indie as a new segment for the games market (Nieborg, 2011 and Kerr, 2006).

Each of the three subcircuits has its own social, dynamic structure, with each its own network of agents (its forces), and its own cultural practices (how the forces classify media as indie). Within the marketing subcircuit there are more subcircuits to be found, going in a loop

between producers and consumers. A circuit between EA Games and the potential customers for an upcoming game, for example. Similar circuits are also the case for the technology and culture subcircuits. The three subcircuits combine the different aspects of the games industry and I will use this to reveal the different aspects of the indie games industry. The result is then a map of the indie games industry<sup>12</sup> where the forces that classify indie, and the interplay between the circuits of technology, culture, and marketing, are revealed.

### *Overview*

In the first chapter, *Indie*, I will answer the sub-question of what indie means in the contemporary games industry. I will expand on the three subcircuits proposed by Kline et al. (2003) in order to introduce the following three chapters and give an overview of the academic debate about classifying games and developers as indie.

The second chapter, *The Production Side of the Indie Games Industry*, revolves around the sub-question of how indie developers position themselves as indie in the games industry. In this chapter I will explore how indie developers are different from non-indie developers and the role of technology in this divide. The main theme is the production process of games and the technological advancements used by indie developers, set in the context of the greater games industry. I argue that the growing professionalization and advancing technology in the games industry resulted in a wider range of developers, which can classify, but also can be classified, as indie.

In the third chapter, *The Audience of Indie*, I will answer the sub-question of how the audience classifies media products or manufacturers as indie with special regards to the role of the authenticity in the process of classifying. I compare authenticity in indie rock music to authenticity in the indie games industry. Indie is becoming a subjective label with no fixed definition. The audience uses indie to create an identity for themselves that distinguishes them from others.

The fourth chapter, *The Marketing of Indie*, deals with the sub-question of how publishers market media products as indie. I research how indie culture has become a commodity (Kline, et al., 2003). The indie games industry has become a market where indie as a culture is being used as a marketing tool.

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<sup>12</sup> Given the word limit of this thesis, I will focus on the western (i.e. North American and European) games industry.

# 1. Indie

In this first chapter of my thesis I will expand on the three subcircuits proposed by Kline et al. (2003) to map the games industry, and give an overview of the academic debate about classifying games and developers as indie. To understand the shift in classifying indie games, we have to look at the origin of the term. Originally, indie derived from independent. A term that signifies a certain context of production (Simon, 2009: p. 2). Simon states that indie in indie games does not signify a genre in games, which *strategy*, *shooter* or *sport* for example do, but refers to the developers and the conditions under which the game was developed (while indie *can* also refer to a certain style, although this is rendered less important by Simon). This was especially apparent in the time before digital distribution, when the network of indie developers consisted out of a cluster of hobbyists (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011: p. 6, Lipkin, 2012: p. 16).

Although Simon makes a good point in stating that indie strictly does not signify a genre (indie games themselves belong in their turn to the genre of shooter, sport, platform, etc. for example), Sony is nevertheless using indie to signify a genre for certain games<sup>13</sup>. Rules on who can classify media as indie do not exist. A company like PopCap<sup>14</sup>, operating independent from a publisher, can classify itself as indie, but can also be seen as mainstream because ‘they prioritize money over creative vision.’ (Lipkin, 2012: p. 9) Mainstream, Lipkin states, is ‘contrasted and defined specifically against the “honest” and “creative” independent culture, which at best says mainstream is everything that is not independent.’ (Lipkin, 2012: p. 9) Being an indie company in these terms means that the company has to adhere to a certain independent culture. Indie has become a subjective classification label next to the objective signifier of a certain mode of production (where a developer either is independent, and thus indie, or not). Only examining the mode of production of indie developers is too simple; a game can be classified as indie when it contains certain features indie games are supposed to have. Sony is using indie as a marketing tool for games with certain styles, which cannot be marketed as mainstream games. Games and developers being classified as indie by developers and publishers reveal two different classifying forces. The audience forms the third force. The audience uses indie as an identification tool, when approaching this from Bourdieu’s notion of taste (Bourdieu, 1983), and identifying themselves with a certain social group, or class. (Newman, Levine, 2012).

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<sup>13</sup> <http://blog.us.playstation.com/2013/05/07/new-indie-games-category-on-playstation-store/>

<sup>14</sup> The developer of the popular *Plants vs. Zombies* franchise.

The developers, publishers, and audience (and how they classify something as indie) form the three study objects of this thesis. In *Digital Play* Kline et al. (2003) define the games industry as an interplay of three subcircuits (the circuit of technology, the circuit of culture, and the circuit of marketing) as a part of an overarching circuit of capital (see figure 1). In the circuit of capital the developers produce commodities (the games), the publishers spread the commodities, and the audience, in their turn, consumes the commodities. A market is born. The developers and publishers generate financial capital by selling the games to the audience, with which they can start the cycle over again. Production, commodity, and consumption then form the three subcircuits of technology (production), culture (consumption), and marketing (commodity), which each has their own dynamic processes and cycles (see figure 2).

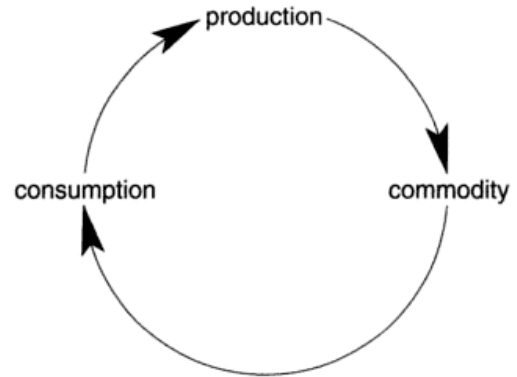


Figure 1. The Circuit of Capital (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 51)

In the second chapter I will research the circuit of technology for the indie games industry. Kline et al. propose a media theory approach for the circuit of technology. The purpose of this

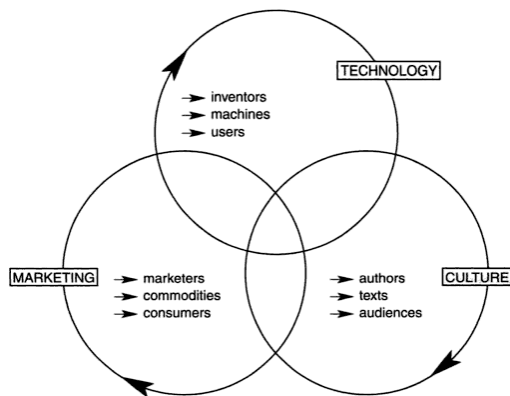


Figure 2. The Three Circuits of Interactivity (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 52)

approach is to understand how technological advancements influence changes in society and on a cultural level. The media theory approach looks critically at how ‘media of communication both shape and are shaped by the cultural and economic circumstances from which they emerge.’ (Kline et al., 2003: p. 32) Following the media theory approach, new technologies change the way information is stored, organized, and distributed. In this approach the people or organizations controlling the media,

control the (flow of) information. In the games industry, and for this thesis, this means that I will look critically at the power struggle in the field of technology between indie and mainstream<sup>15</sup> developers. The former generally having a much lower budget for: certain technologies, extra programmers, design, etc. than the latter.

<sup>15</sup> Also known as triple-A or commercial developers.

The third chapter deals with the circuit of culture. For this circuit, Kline et al. propose a cultural studies approach. Cultural studies' main concern is 'the construction of meaning and the role of mass media and popular culture in that process.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 43) What I find interesting here, from an academic perspective, and how I will use cultural studies for the chapter about the circuit of culture, is the dichotomy between popular culture and the more elitist culture products, and the role of authenticity in this dichotomy. How the audience uses this distinction between high culture versus popular culture to give themselves an identity and how being a fan of indie games, for example, is used as a way to distinguish oneself from mainstream culture.

For the fourth I will research the circuit of marketing. Following Kline et al. in their multidimensional framework, I will research this circuit from a political economy approach. The political economy approach focuses on the structure behind the industry side of, for example, the *cultural industry* (or games industry for that matter). According to media scholar Aphra Kerr, political economy differs from traditional economy in that it sees the economy 'not as separate from, but fundamentally linked to political, social and cultural processes.' (Kerr, 2006: p. 43) In *The Business and Culture of Digital Games*, Kerr also refers to other academics of what political economy entails. According to Mosco (1996: p. 25), a political economy of the media explores the structure and social relations that form the production, distribution and consumption of cultural and symbolic products. What is important for Mosco is to what extent the social relations can be seen as unequal (Kerr, 2006: p. 44). Kerr also refers to Garnham (2000: p. 39), who states that political economy focuses on the power relations in a capitalist system and the effects this has on the structure of the media system, and the relation between the producers and consumers of culture (Kerr, 2006: p. 44). In this chapter I will examine how the relation between the producers and consumers has changed. How publishers, through the commodification of indie culture, can use indie for a marketing purpose without being regarded as indie themselves.

In this thesis I argue that indie in the games industry no longer simply means that a developer operates independent from a publisher. The following three chapters will reveal, through an analysis of the circuits of technology, culture, and marketing, the interplay at work when it comes to classifying what is indie in the games industry. Starting with chapter two: *The Production Side of the Indie Games Industry*.

## 2. The Production Side of the Indie Games Industry

In this chapter I will analyze the first of the three subcircuits: the circuit of technology. I will argue that the line, that once made a clear divide between indie developers (operating independent from publishers) and mainstream developers, has become blurred. It is getting harder and harder for indie developers to undoubtedly distinguish themselves from the mainstream developers.

In *The Business and Cultures of Digital Games*, Aphra Kerr (2006) poses the question if the games industry can be seen as a cultural industry. Where cultural industry was originally used as a critical and political term targeting the industrialization of culture, over the years the term has gained multiple meanings, losing the critical connotation it originally had. Kerr states that, originally, the 'industrialisation of culture was the opposite of what culture was meant to do. They believed that culture was meant to offer a critique of everyday life and the prevailing political and economic system, not to be a fundamental part of it.' (Kerr, 2006: p. 44) Cultural industry is nowadays being used within the context of a political economy perspective, to research how capitalistic systems form the production, distribution, and consumption patterns of media products. Viewing from this political economy approach, Kerr poses the question if the games industry can be seen as a part of the cultural industry. Kerr refers to David Hesmondhalgh (2002: p. 17-19) who states that to confirm this, the following elements have to be present in the games industry:

- *The high risk involved in cultural production.* A small part of the cultural products constitutes the lion's share of the total revenue. The biggest part of the cultural products does not make a profit. Hence, publishers and mainstream developers are inclined to develop 'safe' products, which are certain to make a profit.
- *The high production costs, but low reproduction costs of cultural products.* The initial investments to create a cultural product are high, but the marginal costs, to reproduce it, are low. To make a profit, the product has to be sold to as many people as possible.
- *The semi-public good nature of cultural products and services.* This means that the product is not destroyed during its use. Other people can use the same product again. Either against payment, or for free. This makes a cultural product a (semi-) public good. (Kerr, 2006: p. 45-46)

This chapter will explain how the indie games industry can be seen as a cultural industry. Through, among others, growing professionalization, newer and cheaper technologies, and increasingly varying industrial and organizational structures, it is getting harder and harder for indie developers to clearly distinct themselves from mainstream developers. In the following section (§2.1) I will

examine Martin and Deuze's notion of the greater games industry as a setup for the rest of the chapter. Martin and Deuze state that the indie games industry has to be seen in the context of this greater games industry, in which it is playing an increasingly bigger role. For researching the independent production of games, the media scholars examine five aspects of producing games in the games industry. I will use four of these aspects to structure this chapter: technology (§2.2), laws and regulations (§2.3), industrial and organizational structures (respectively §2.4.1 and §2.4.2), and occupational careers (§2.5). The fifth aspect, markets, will be used in chapter four: *The Marketing of Indie*.

### *2.1 The Greater Games Industry*

Today's games industry is controlled by only a small number of (global) corporations (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 277). Only a few developers, distributors and publishers are responsible for the most profitable and highest selling games (for example: *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), or *Grand Theft Auto 5* (Rockstar North, 2013)). Indiana University media scholars Chase Bowen Martin and Mark Deuze state that, according to industry rhetoric, 'despite a wide-ranging discourse of what independent actually means, a single unifying thread that is recognized throughout the industry is that an indie game cannot be created under the creative or financial control of one of these external entities'. (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 277-278) These entities, the few corporations controlling the games industry (among others: Activision, Sony, Blizzard, EA, and Microsoft), form the mainstream domain. The indie developers are operating outside this domain, reverting to the good old days, when the games industry consisted out of hobbyist and small-scale development processes. Opposed to the hit-driven multi-billion dollar market of today, which is controlled by global corporations (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 278).

However, the distinctions between indie developers and the mainstream developers are not that clear as the industry rhetoric claims it is. Newer and cheaper technologies make it possible for small teams to publish games themselves on a growing number of new platforms. The indie games industry contribution to the greater games industry is becoming more and more important and has to be seen in the context of a 'global commercial multibillion dollar market.' (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 278) There is no longer a clear difference between indie and mainstream developers; the line that divided them has become blurred.



To map the indie games industry, Martin and Deuze researched the independent production of games from two perspectives: the first is analyzing the discourse among gamer communities and the interactions between producers and players. The focus here lies on the relationship between the cultural products on the one hand and the experiences of the gamers on the other. The second perspective is a political economy approach to the greater games industry. They look at independent game production by researching its technology, laws and regulations, industrial and organizational structures, occupational careers, and markets. These five aspects form the basis of the greater games industry. These aspects are used to research the indie games industry in the context in which it is created (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 279). As I am also researching the independent game production in the context of the games industry, I will use these five aspects proposed by Martin and Deuze to structure this chapter. I will expand on the structure laid out by Martin and Deuze by analyzing and comparing theories and concepts from other academics. In this manner, I will create a clear overview of how forces, in the production side of the indie games industry, classify what is indie. However, I will use the aspect about *markets* in the fourth chapter of this thesis, as I will focus on the subject of markets in that chapter.

The difference between independent game production and mainstream game production is not black and white. The indie games industry is becoming more and more a bigger part of the greater games industry. The two seemingly extremes, indie and mainstream developers, are facing each other, but, as I will argue in this chapter, there is not a clear dividing line to be found as the two gradually flow into one another, and with that, enter each other's domain.

## 2.2 Technology

With the arrival of newer, faster, and cheaper network technologies, there was also a rise to be seen in new digital distribution platforms. With these new platforms, indie developers are offered new ways to offer their games directly to the customers, without offering a physical copy of the game (Lipkin, 2011: p. 12). Download speeds are getting higher (Belson, 2013: p. 12), making it possible to offer bigger sized files (and making it even possible to bundle multiple games and selling them as a bundle, for example the Humble Bundle<sup>16</sup>), more and more online stores are popping up (think of Apple's iTunes Store or PlayStation's Store for example), but it also gives more space for (indie) developers to spread their games to as many people as possible over the whole world.

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<sup>16</sup> The website of the Humble Bundle: <https://www.humblebundle.com/>

According to Martin and Deuze, because digital distribution platforms mainly cater to niche markets, the file sizes of the games must be reduced in order to maintain accessibility when downloading the game. This has implications for the bigger data files (mainly being graphic and audio files). These files will be the first to be left out of the game to save space. This means that 'independent developers more often must rely on abstractions over realism in their art assets, and game mechanics are more often prioritized because of the play sessions of the games generally being shorter.' (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 281) Hence, the independent developers are forced to focus more on the gameplay instead of (also) focusing on the graphics and audio elements, of which the likes are seen in the bigger, mainstream, games. Besides this, and what Martin and Deuze not explicitly state, smaller development teams, lower budgets, and less available development time for indie developers also generally result in a lower level of resources available for state of the art graphics.

With download speeds getting higher and broadband getting more bandwidth, I think that big file sizes are not the problem anymore. This is especially apparent in the online stores of the bigger mainstream developers and publishers. Blizzard<sup>17</sup>, Ubisoft<sup>18</sup>, EA<sup>19</sup>, they all got their own online store, circumventing the retailers (although they still sell physical copies via these retailers). Indie developers generally do not have the budget to create a download platform themselves, but there are options available to them, where they give up a percentage of the turnover to the platform holders, which offer server space to the developers. Well know examples of this, within the gamer communities, are Steam<sup>20</sup>, Xbox Live Arcade and the Sony PlayStation Store. With the rise of digital distribution, the distributor and retailer can be left out of the value chain. Indie developers become their own publishers, but have to give up a percentage to the holders of the digital distribution platform.

The focus on the gameplay mechanic, of which Martin and Deuze think is forced through small file sizes, has, according to Lipkin, a more nostalgic basis. Contemporary indie developers generally take inspiration from the 8-bit and 16-bit eras of gaming with regard to mechanics (Lipkin, 2012: p. 10). This is one of the points the people in the documentary INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE (2012) state: indie games are about gameplay, not about graphical realism, which seems to be the focus of mainstream developers. The documentary interviews different independent developers and journalists in the games industry. They feel that mainstream developers want to amp their

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<sup>17</sup> The online store of Blizzard: <http://eu.blizzard.com/store/browse.xml?f=c:1>

<sup>18</sup> The online store of Ubisoft: <http://shop.ubi.com/>

<sup>19</sup> The online store of EA: <https://www.origin.com/>

<sup>20</sup> The online store of Steam: <http://store.steampowered.com/>

games as much as possible, because they have other goals: entertain people and get as big as an audience as possible, as to make more profit. Indie games on the other hand are a product of the generation that first grew up with video games. The people in the documentary see indie games as a way of starting a dialogue with players, a way to express themselves, through the mechanics of the game. One of the developers (of the indie game *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010)) in the documentary says: 'Our goal was to make a game that our 13 year old selves would be superhuge fanboys over.' This shows the motivation to focus on the mechanics, rather than on graphical realism. But the focus on gameplay over graphics does not take away the fact the indie developers are forced to be creative with the available funds. A lower budget also limits the indie developers in their ability to create high-end graphics. Therefore, I think that the focus on gameplay over graphics is twofold: indie developers want to show their love for the nostalgic gameplay, but they are in a way also forced to do this, as they generally do not have funds available to invest in high-end graphics (or high-end technology for that matter). Indie developers have to be creative with their (financial) constraints, but this is not something new. The game developers of the late '70s and the '80s had to make aesthetic decisions due to their technological constraints (Collins, 2007: p. 209). Contemporary indie developers may have better technologies now, but due to the tendency towards nostalgia and their financial constraints, they still use the same kind of creativity as their predecessors.

Because of the smaller file sizes of indie games, these games are generally shorter and consumed quickly, when compared to mainstream games. The digital platforms therefore need a constant stream of new games and content. To fulfill this need, game developers, whether they are independent or not, use game engines to build their games on (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 281). These game engines have pre-installed tools with which the game developers can develop their games, without having to start from scratch. The bigger mainstream game developers can afford to build a full engine themselves (although they do not necessarily do this), but the smaller independent developers use the middleware created by other developers. On the other hand, the smaller independent developers can also choose to build a game engine themselves, which they can license out later.

In 1998, game developer Epic Games created an engine for their upcoming game *Unreal Tournament* (Epic Games, 1999). The game, a first person shooter, was a big hit and the game developer decided to out license the engine they build. The engine proved to be very successful as many other game developers decided to use the Unreal engine (Horvath, 2012: p. 1). Roughly 15 years after the release of the first engine, the fourth engine is in the latest stages of its development

and has made huge technological advancements, especially with regard to graphical realism (Horvath, 2012: p. 1-2). At first glance, the engine does not look to be meant for small developers with small budgets. A trailer shows the potential of the game engine with stunning graphics and complex code<sup>21</sup>, features generally seen in mainstream games. Because of the smaller game production resources, 'indie games are in part defined by the reliance on alternative production and distribution structures compared to mainstream game companies.' (Lipkin, 2012: p. 11) Independent developers have to find (cheaper) alternatives to the big expensive game engines, when they do not want to develop an engine themselves (which is one of the reasons that indie developers generally cannot create the state of the art graphics their mainstream counterparts can create).

Although the Unreal Engine 4 at first glance seemed to be developed for mainstream developers, Epic Games does not charge any money for their engine if it is used non-commercially or if the profit of the developed game is below \$50,000 (they will charge 25% for every dollar above \$50,000). Hence, this option is meant for games with a small-scale distribution (Lipkin, 2012: p. 12). Unity, another engine mentioned by Lipkin in his article, is not as technologically advanced as the Unreal Engine 4, but is financially a better option for independent developers who expect to make more than \$50,000 with their game. The engine will cost \$1,500. An amount that, for beginning game developers, still can be hard to finance. An open source engine could then be a solution. An example of this is PyGame, a game engine based on the programming language Python, which is completely open source and therefore free to use, or, the relatively cheap, Game Maker, which was used to develop the popular *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) for example.

There are certainly possibilities for independent developers with small budgets to use game engines developed by other developers. The available budget plays a big part in the decision for the engine, which reveals a big difference with mainstream developers, whose publishers generally finance the high costs for professional game engines (Kerr, 2006: p. 64-65).

New technologies make it possible for indie developers to distribute and publish their games themselves, but the difference between technology used by indie and mainstream developers is getting bigger. On the one hand, mainstream developers generally have a larger budget for technologies, due to funding from publishers. This makes it possible to create extraordinary graphics and big file sized, spectacular games. On the other hand, indie developers take inspiration from the games they grew up with and focus on gameplay mechanics (which the games they grew up with also focused on). They see developing games as a way of expressing

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<sup>21</sup> The trailer of the Unreal Engine 4: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOvfn1p92\\_8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOvfn1p92_8)

themselves rather than profitable software (INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE, 2012). Extraordinary graphics are not needed per se for them to make great games.

### 2.3 Laws and Regulations

When examining the laws and regulations of the games industry, ownership of intellectual property (IP) is important for defining what can be regarded as indie. When a developer works for another company, the IP of the product will be in the hands of the contracting company. Martin and Deuze refer to an article of Leif Schumacher (2006), who sees games funded by a third party, not as truly independent, due to that third party controlling the intellectual property (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 282). In terms of laws and regulations, there is a clear line to be found between independent and not independent: a developer can be regarded as independent when they have control over the IP.

This does not mean, however, that the control over the IP cannot be transferred after the production of a game. There are instances where developers finance the production of their own game, thus controlling the IP, but sold their control to a publisher, who then took control over franchising, distribution, etc. of the game. Martin and Deuze give an example of such an instance with the game *Flow* (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 282). *Flow* (Thatgamecompany, 2006) is a product of Thatgamecompany, which started out as an amateur project. The developers, at the time students, financed the project themselves. After the game was finished, Sony wanted the game to be exclusive for the PlayStation and made an offer, which the developers accepted. What I find interesting is that, in terms of IP, Thatgamecompany and *Flow* could first be regarded as indie, but after they sold the control over the IP, not anymore. In the contract, Thatgamecompany made a three game deal with Sony, and after the completion of the third game, *Journey*, Thatgamecompany raised enough funds to reclaim their independence and publish their own games<sup>22</sup>.

In terms of law and regulations, the IP holding party determines whether a game can be classified as indie or not. Examining this from a law and regulations perspective *alone* makes this classification system look simple, but it pays no regard to the intrinsic value of the game itself. In a broader perspective, it seems it is a result of an aversion against mainstream games (i.e. games published by publishers). If a game is made while a publisher is holding the IP, it implies that they have the creative control or, in any case, the last say over the creative direction of the game.

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<sup>22</sup> Polygon published an article about this deal:

<http://www.polygon.com/gaming/2012/6/14/3085521/thatgamecompany-raises-5-5-million-towards-its-independence>

Therefore, it is not about who holds the IP rights per se for classifying a game as indie or not, but about the implication of the interference of a publisher.

#### 2.4.1 Industrial Structures

When she examined the structure and production cycle of the games industry, Kerr noted similarities with its counterparts in other media (book, movie, and music) industries. A publisher funds the project and provides the capital needed for production, and takes care of marketing and distribution of the media product. The creator of the media product receives royalties when the product hits the market. This is the same for developers who are contractually tied to a publisher in the games industry. Kerr states that the production process is increasingly incorporated in the publishing process. Publishers are getting more and more influence in the creative process of the developer, resulting in a “corporate professional” structure of cultural production.’ (Kerr, 2006: p. 64) The creative processes of game developers tied to publishers are increasingly being steered by the publishers, this is a big difference from artists and writers who, despite being tied to a publisher, are far more independent than their counterparts in the games industry. Hence, the difference between independence and being tied to publisher seems more distinct in the games industry than in the movie, music and book industries.

Kerr defines three types of development companies operating in the games industry (Kerr, 2006: p. 64):

1. *First party developer.* These are developers who are operating *in-house* at the publisher (for example: the developer of *Assassin’s Creed* (2007) is Ubisoft Montreal, which is part of the publishing company Ubisoft) and the developers under contract of a publisher.
2. *Second party developer.* These types of developers are under contract to develop games for publishers. The publishers create the concept and the developer develops it. This is also called *work-for-hire*. There are independent developers who started with doing work-for-hire to accumulate capital in order to fund their own projects later on.
3. *Third party developer.* Kerr describes this group as ‘independent development houses, which develop their own projects and try to sell them to a publisher’ (Kerr, 2006: p. 64), but I would like to state that there are definitely independent developers who do not have the intention to sell their project to a publisher. This is for example made clear in *INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE* (2012). Therefore, I think that this type of developers has to be split into two categories: those who have the intention to sell to publishers and those who do not.

Martin and Deuze state that the structure of the greater games industry has taken a form that is not particularly well designed for the development of independent games. The most profitable and successful games are mainstream games, which, technologically speaking, are very advanced. The costs of using these advanced technologies (including the cost of knowledge required for using the technologies) is too high for developers without a capital injection from a third party, making it practically necessary for independent developers to tie themselves to a publisher.

The publishers see the indie market as a new domain, to which they possibly could expand their business. Traditionally, the different game markets (e.g. the PC, console, or, the more recent, mobile and browser market) were occupied by the independent game developers, but because these markets were expanding, corporations, seeing potential in these growing markets, started to 'invade' these realms (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 284). Martin and Deuze refer to an article by Bustamante (2004) to state that 'there is a tendency among analog media companies to move into new digital domains by only viewing the potential that the new medium can provide as a market, without weighing the creative advantages of retooling production and audience appeal to the particulars of the new medium.' (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 284) Hence, the publishers measure the success of a game against the profit it will generate through the licensing and franchising possibilities. On basis of these possibilities, publishers decide which game or developer, they will tie to them. To publishers, the cultural value of a game is not important for its success. They need assurance that the game will give them profit. But the publishers face the '90/10 dilemma' (Dyer-Witford, Sharman, 2005). Only 10% of the games generate 90% of the profit. The major publishers choose for the safe options: expanding on titles, franchises, and licenses, which have been proven to be successful. For example developing a new *Call of Duty* title instead of developing a new first person shooter game, of which they do not know if it will succeed or not.

On the other hand the publishers have to publish innovative games and experiment with new games and technologies, to make sure they stay ahead of their competitors. Nieborg states that 'in comparison to non-cultural commodities, once a blockbuster game is out on the market its value decreases rapidly.' (Nieborg, 2011: p. 6) Because of this, experimenting with new technologies (e.g. the PlayStation 4 or the Xbox One) and games is necessary for publishers to generate profit.

Publishers have to find a balance between experimenting with new games and expanding with older, proven to be successful, games: 'The balancing act of diversification versus standardization and of rationalization versus innovation, harks back to the classical argument of creativity versus capital and of art versus commerce, a theme that is at the root of the notion of

(the) Culture Industry.’ (Nieborg, 2011: p. 7) This will explain the invasion of mainstream developers and publishers in the indie games market. The independent games industry is growing, and experimenting with indie games (i.e. investing in independent developers) can be another source of income for publishers while at the same time staying a step ahead of competitors.

Be that as it may, success is measured different for publishers than for indie developers. The documentary *INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE* (2012) shows that indie developers are not in pursuit of making as much profit as possible, but are in pursuit of creating cultural value and expressing themselves through, what they call, art. They make games, because of their love for games, not to generate profit per se. That said, they are not against generating profit through their games (naturally, they have to pay their bills); making a profit of their games is just not their motivation and highest priority while making their game. This is different for publishers and mainstream developers, for whom success means generating profit. Martin and Deuze exemplify this with Clover. Clover is an independent studio, set up by Capcom, a major mainstream game developer, which wanted to diversify their brand. The games Clover made were received very well by the critics and praised for their artwork. It even boosted the reputation of Capcom. Nevertheless, Capcom closed Clover after it did not make as much profit as Capcom had expected (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 285).

The perspective the documentary gives us on indie developers may be a traditional one, where indie is seen as that ‘what is not mainstream’ (Lipkin, 2012: p. 10). The indie developers in the movie explicitly state not wanting to be mainstream. Game scholar Jennifer Whitson (2012) notices a new group of independent developers in the social and mobile market, who do not share the views of the traditional indie developers per se. These are developers in the new and rising social and mobile games market.

In her article, Whitson compares the social and mobile games market with the console games market. She states that the structure of the console market is not sustainable. Developing a game for the console market requires a high investment, which in most cases is not recouped. Only a small percentage of the games (the hits) produce the most profit. Developing games for consoles comes with a high risk. Because of the high investments costs, publishers are often necessary to cover these costs in order to develop the game. However, because of the high risk, publishers claim a larger portion of the potential profit, but can also interfere with the creative process in order to make the game appeal to a large as an audience as possible. The developers then lose a part of their control over the creative process (Whitson, 2012: p. 123-125; Kerr, 2006: p. 65).



Whitson observes that ‘the escalation in budgets has not been accompanied by market growth, partly due to the lack of continued financial investment in console games, and the increasing number of cheaper venues for games. Surviving console studios must continually work harder just to maintain their financial position.’ (Whitson, 2012: p. 124) With a lack of growth of the console market, developers are facing financial trouble. The social and mobile games market on the other hand, is growing and its success is a logical result. Social and mobile games are very accessible: they are either (relatively) cheap or free and the hardware is already in the possession of the players. Most of the games for the iOS are not expensive; most are free or cost circa \$1. Part of this has to do with the low development costs for the developers, but also the expectations of low purchasing costs of the audience. Developing teams are smaller and a publisher is much less necessary; lower investment costs are required and developers can easily publish the games themselves to the platforms. Despite the low risk, the marginal profit per game is very low. To reach high profits, the developers have to sell much more games than they would have on the console games market, but the social and mobile games market has a much larger user database the developers have access to, making it possible to offer games at low prices and still make a profit.

However, developing games for the social and mobile market has got its restrictions. Consoles are made with the purpose of gaming, while the hardware for social and mobile games are not (in principle). The games are very suitable for the expectations the audience has for an iPhone or a browser, for example, but a console gives a developer much more developing possibilities (for example with regard to graphics or sound). Jesper Juul calls these games, *casual games*. Casual games are ‘games that are easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations.’ (Juul, 2010: p. 5) The audience of these games do not expect high end games, but casual games, available at low purchase costs, easy to learn, and can be played in short time bursts. Because of the low marginal revenue per game, developers have, in order to make profit with the game, to take monetization into account with the game design: ‘While proving that developers can profit with non-console games, developers are discovering that social and mobile game design is closely imbricated with designing for monetization, marketing, and advertising needs, rather than an idealized freedom to experiment with fun and social play.’ (Whitson, 2012: p. 125) Traditional indie developers may find it difficult to give up a part of the game design for monetization, marketing, and advertising needs. They would have to give up a part of their personal expression. This group of developers disdains ‘selling out’ (Whitson, 2012: p. 125). But with the new social and mobile market, a new group of developers reveals themselves. A group of developers from different backgrounds and cultural milieus. For example: from branches like web

design, marketing, sales, etc. Whitson states that these new developers speak a different ‘language’ than the traditional indie developers (Whitson, 2012: p. 125). They do not make games because of their love for games and as a way of expressing themselves, but because they want to make profit as a business. A game like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009), made for a browser, has a lot of incentives for the players to do *micropayments*<sup>23</sup> so Zynga, the developer, will generate more profit, whereas a game like *Ridiculous Fishing* (Vlambeer, 2013), by the indie developer Vlambeer, will cost the player only a single payment of €2,69, after which the player can enjoy and experience the game without having to pay for anything else.

One of the revenue models the new group uses, for example in *FarmVille*, is the so-called *free-to-play* model. In this model, the game is offered for free to the player, but gives the player the option to make purchases in the game self. Using this model, the developers have to adjust their game design in order to stimulate the players to make these micro-purchases. Supercell, developer of the mobile game *Clash of Clans* (Supercell, 2012), uses a certain formula in the game design of the popular game. The game design is designed in such a way that the players are constantly being stimulated to do purchases (Katkoff, 2012). Purchasing gems with real money, for example, to shorten waiting periods in the game. With such a game design, the game seems to be the product of a company that sees the game as a profit generator first instead of a work of art or expression. Games with such a game design can be seen as hidden payment machines (Whitehead, 2013). The gameplay of these games is thin and simple. With a high retention rate<sup>24</sup> of players, the game has become immensely popular. Of course, this is also due to a very good game design with an equally good monetization design, but their formula works: high retention means that there is a higher chance players will return and make purchases, which leads to higher profits. Although (most of) the new group of mobile and social developers operates independent, they do not speak the same ‘language’ or share the same cultural background with the traditional indie developers.

With EA publishing their *Indie Bundle*, the founding of Clover by Capcom, and the new group of developers appearing in the social and mobile games market, publishers and mainstream developers seem to be finding their way into the indie domain, which, for them, can be seen as a new financial viable market. Where indie developers previously had their own domain, they now have to share it with developers from different backgrounds. This becomes especially apparent with the more commercial driven new group of developers of social and mobile games, who, in most cases, technically can be called indie (they publish their games themselves, without a

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<sup>23</sup> Small payments, generally done *in-game*.

<sup>24</sup> Retention rate means: the rate of returning players.

publisher), but do not share the same definition of success for a game. Personal expression and making games with a certain cultural value (the approach of the traditional indie developers) versus making profit (the approach of the new social and mobile game developers).

Publishers here see indie as a new market, with the new group of developers discovering the frontier, finding new ways to generate profit over lower budget games, while the traditional indie developers can only watch and are forced to share the domain, that they originally occupied alone. It has become an industry, which can also have its advantages. The potential audience has become bigger and new opportunities reveal themselves with the growing attention from Sony and Microsoft and the ability to self-publish on digital distribution platforms. In that regard, it has become easier to stay independent from publishers.

#### *2.4.2 Organizational Structures*

With the rise of the independent games industry, small indie development teams are getting more and more unlikely (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 285). Traditional indie developers, for example the hobbyists programming in their basement, usually consisted out of one or two people. Currently, the organizational structures in the indie games industry are getting more varied, and to classify developers as indie on basis of the size of the development team no longer seems applicable. Bigger teams are becoming more common to develop games. If an independent developer wants to survive, it will have to professionalize, increase in scale, and specialize (Kerr, 2006: p. 78), although I would add that scaling, in my opinion, is not necessary per se. Vlambeer or Team Meat are examples of small teams (both consists of two developers) and are very successful. Their success, however, does for a big part rely on marketing and they use their small sized team as a marketing ploy. Hence, professionalization is very important for them. The points for survival Kerr pointed out, is an organizational structure generally seen with mainstream developers, where multiple teams work together on multiple projects. This scale will not be seen with independent developers. Projects of mainstream developers are divided into smaller tasks, which are taken up by the specialists in the teams, where, with indie developers, *all* the tasks are done by one person or a very small group of developers. With the scale of indie developers getting bigger (i.e. more persons working on a project), the tasks are being divided over more people. This means that 'in the process of submitting their work into the greater whole, the individual worker forfeits individual claims to the independent status of the studio or the product through the chain of approval that is necessary in hierarchal [sic] production methods.' (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 285) The members of a team are

getting more and more dependent on each other when the scale increases. The added share of the individual developer (Martin and Deuze call this the 'auteur') to the greater whole is then getting lost.

Indie developers working in small teams, or consisting out of one person, are examples of practitioners of *post-Fordism*<sup>25</sup> strategies. The different skills, which are necessary to produce a game (technical, but also business skills), have to be learned by one or a few persons. This can be compared to a factory, being run by a very small group of people. The flexible developer, with multiple skills, is a result of the emergence of *immaterial labor*: 'Immaterial labour takes places [sic] in a post-fordist [sic] context where innovation driven and deregulated economies lead towards the adoption of flexible and outsourced work. Here, theorists have identified a process of casualization of work, where production is moved from the traditional workplace to other social spaces, leading to an economization of daily life, as creative workers and consumer within the games industry become freelancers and creators of content.' (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011: p. 3) Production is no longer bound to a certain space, that in the Fordism era was bound to the location of the factory, which leads to the possibility of offering services as a freelancer.

Despite working individually, or as part of a very small team, there are communities created by independent developers. Members of these communities help each other with problems (technical, but also business) and share knowledge and information. They form an autonomous community of game production (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011: p. 3). Communities of indie developers started out as clusters of hobbyists and professional developers working on personal projects outside of their job. But, since indie game projects started to generate profit, indie communities grew out to be an infrastructure, on which the independent developers build their games. They develop their games as separate projects, but are dependent on each other to gather the necessary knowledge and help (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011: p. 6). The members of the communities meet online, but also in physical spaces, to form a network of developers who share information, code, and knowledge, and help each other to help the community. Not necessarily for free. The freelancers get their jobs by applying their expertise at indie developers lacking that expertise. Mainstream developers develop these kinds of things in-house. Different teams (programming, audio, and design teams for example) work together to create one game and the people within a team learn from each other. These teams are merged at independent developers. One person can, for example, be the programming, 3D design, and marketing team and is destined to learned from other members of the community.

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<sup>25</sup> The concept of post-Fordism will be explained in chapter four.

Hitherto, indie developers consisted out of a one-man factory (the hobbyists or professional developers with side projects), or at most a very small sized team, who created the whole game (Guevara-Villalobos, 2011: p. 6). But as the indie games industry grew, the organizational structure of indie developers diversified. With corporations and publishers entering the field, the level of professionalism (with mainstream developers as the measuring point) grew. The old, traditional idea of 'two men programming in a garage' (for example the hobbyists) made way for a very diverse range of organizational structures, although the traditional still exists. Classifying developers as indie by size of the development team is then not viable as a 'classifying tool'. The one-man factory is only one in the diverse range of organizational structures in the indie games industry.

### *2.5 Occupational Careers*

When comparing mainstream developers with independent developers with regard to careers in the games industry, there (often) is an hierarchic, standardized, and systematic structure on the mainstream side to be observed, creating a smooth workflow from employee-to-employee and from team-to-team. This is the opposite of what usually is connected to indie developers: creativity, flexibility, and innovation (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 287). This is seen as the difference between the big mainstream development teams and the smaller independent teams. There are stories of transition from one side to another. If a professional developer of a mainstream studio has the desire to have more control over their work, expressing themselves more, or seeing no way of moving up the ladder (i.e. disapprove of the hierarchical system), that developer can decide to start for his or her own. On the other hand, an indie developer who wants a steady income for example, can choose to apply for a job at a mainstream developer.

There are generally two ways how people move into the indie games industry. One way is starting out as an amateur, without any experience in the games industry, creating a game on his or her own, or co-operating with a small number of people. The other way is working in the games industry as a professional at a mainstream developer and choosing to start an independent studio out of dissatisfaction with the culture of the mainstream developer (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 288). However, while examining the industrial structure of the games industry, Whitson notes a new group of developers coming from different (cultural) backgrounds, which can be seen as independent developers (they are independent from publishers), but do not speak the same 'language' as the traditional indie developers (Whitson, 2012: p. 125). This new group did not start out in the games industry or as an amateur, but started in the marketing or sales branch for

example. These particular backgrounds are often set in the context of professional corporations, making the scaling of a developer team easier as the developers from such backgrounds are already adjusted to a more hierarchical and systematic way of working (which they experienced in said professional corporations). Especially when the goal of professional corporations (maximizing profit) coincides with the goals of the new group of developers. The rise of this new group, with games as *FarmVille*, forms the third way how people can enter the indie games industry, but differs significantly from the first two ways as there is no background in game development per se.

## 2.6 Conclusion

I would argue that the indie games industry has become a cultural industry and, in addition to this, plays a bigger role in the greater games industry. The domain, of which they originally wanted to differentiate themselves from. The industrialization of indie games has resulted in a diverse range of developers and corporations, which are also operating in the industry. Traditional indie developers are not alone anymore in what originally was their domain. The 'traditional' in traditional indie developers refers to an era where the indie developers simply accepted that they would not generate any profit of their games. Currently, there are developers and corporations active in the indie domain, which are there for that purpose. This makes indie a flexible term as it applies to a wider range of developers.

In the circuit of technology of the indie games industry, the indie developers depend on new (and cheaper) technologies that make it possible to easily distribute their games. Digital distribution makes it possible for indie developers to self-publish, without having the high cost of making and distributing physical copies of their games. Although the mainstream developers have a higher budget to invest in new technologies, the new technologies have also become cheaper, making it possible for indie developers to use them as well. However, mainstream developers have also got more capital available for manpower to operate the new technologies, which are necessary to make games with high-end graphics for example, but the lower number of developers in a indie development team also results in a higher degree of creative control of the indie developers. Indie developers are now automatically a part of an industry; it is no longer a domain solely for hobbyists. Growing professionalization and the diversity of game developers in the indie games industry ensure that indie developers cannot any longer clearly distinct themselves from mainstream developers. This results in a wider range in which developers can classify, but also can be classified,

as indie. There is no longer a clear line that divides the two opposing sides (indie and mainstream) of the spectrum.

In the next chapter, *The Audience of Indie*, I will research how, in the circuit of culture, the audience judges the developers and games in context of authenticity, to classify what is indie in the games industry.

### 3. The Audience of Indie

In this chapter, I examine the second of the three subcircuits in the context of the indie games industry using a cultural studies approach. As mentioned in the introduction, indie was originally seen as a type of development rather than a game genre. The word independent refers to the status of a developer rather than a certain category of games. In this chapter I will argue how the consumers, or the audience if you will, of indie games classify media as indie. In the first section (§3.1) I will study indie culture in general. After that, I will research the role of authenticity in the process of classifying games or developers as indie (§3.2). In the third section I will argue that the concept of indie can be seen as a form of taste and therefore can be used as an identification tool by its audience (§3.3).

#### 3.1 Indie Culture

When studying the culture of indie it is useful to compare indie games to other indie media, as indie culture shares a few common traits across different media:

While the definition of “indie gaming“ is historically specific to a contemporary movement in game development, “indie” or “independent” media production movements share a few common traits which permit cross-media comparison that clarifies in some ways some of the inchoate positions amongst indie gaming’s early adopters. The definition at stake here relates less to isolating *the* indie genre, or even asserting the existence of a genre associated with the term at all. Rather, it is a way to isolate what considerations have helped create and continue to create something that could call itself a movement – and see itself as “indie” – in the first place. (Lipkin, 2011: p. 9-10)

The indie culture as a movement is linked across different media. In the music industry, indie culture has longer been apparent. In his book *Our Band Could Be Your Life* (Azerrad, 2001), writer and journalist Michael Azerrad describes the uprise of the *Do-It-Yourself* culture of the 80’s in the music industry: the bands took matter into their own hands and began to record and produce their music themselves, without the help of a major record label; this started indie rock music.

With more and more bands following the indie culture in the music industry, a new aesthetic rose with it, making indie a music genre. Music scholar Ryan Hibbett argues, in “What is Indie Rock?” (2006), that, besides the significance of indie as a category of music, it satisfies a



demand for social differentiation for its consumers (Hibbett, 2006: p. 55). The consumers use indie rock to differentiate themselves. Hibbett refers to the notion of taste as explained by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1983). Bourdieu sees taste as a means to legitimize and naturalize certain social and economical forces (Hibbett, 2006: 56). Social in the way how someone, for example, can value some cultural artifacts as better than others, so they can identify themselves with the *better culture*, while differentiating from others who identify themselves with *lesser culture*. Economic in the way of how corporations can use taste to exploit the certain values consumers hold with regard to better culture. This can be seen in the games industry, where there are publishers who see the indie games industry as a new market.

Instead of better and lesser culture, which are subjective terms, Bourdieu distinguishes between high art<sup>26</sup> and popular or *mass culture*. The taste people have, will make the difference between the two (Hibbett, 2006: 57). Taste, then, is a form of cultural capital: 'A form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artefacts.' (Johnson, 1993: p. 7) With cultural capital, people distinguish between high art and popular culture. In the eyes of consumers of high art, popular culture is deemed inferior: a lesser culture. Within the field of rock music, Hibbett discerns two types of music, which form a symbiosis in the relation of high art and popular culture (Hibbett, 2006: p. 57):

1. Music that has a large audience, and hence is regarded as popular, which generates high profits.
2. Music with a small audience, which generates low profits.

The second field, in which the indie rock music is found, gets its meaning (i.e. its identity) out of 'not being field 1'. Consumers in the second field see the value of that field in not following the mass, formed by the many consumers in field 1. This results in an elitist and superior attitude of field 2 towards field 1. Or, in other words: of indie rock towards popular music. For example, a friend of mine hates it when an obscure band he loves becomes popular ("I used to be the only one who knew them.") The fact that music in field 2 has a small audience and does not generate a high profit is seen as something positive.

The characteristics of indie culture explained above also seem to apply to the audience of indie games. Indie separates good (or: better) culture from popular culture; it exists independent of

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<sup>26</sup> High art here can be seen as superior cultural products (in the eyes of a group) over inferior cultural products (from popular or mass culture).

the popular, mainstream culture and the political-economic forces, which are intertwined with it. Being indie is 'not being mainstream':

For those on the "outside," the link between "indie" and "independent" is never necessarily made, thus preserving its meaning as something of an enigma, something other people know. One can begin to see, then, that indie rock exists largely as an absence, a nebulous "other," or as a negative value that acquires meaning from what it opposes. Indie rock is far from a static entity; rather, it is a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents (bands, listeners, labels, critics, etc.) with diverse objectives. (Hibbett, 2006: p. 58)

With regard to developers in the indie games industry this is exemplified in *INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE* (2012). One of the indie developers states, for example, that:

"Part of it is about not trying to be professional. Like, a lot of people come in the indie games, trying to be like a big company. What those game companies do, is create highly polished things that serve as large as an audience as possible. The way that you do that, is by filing off all the bumps on something. If there is a sharp corner, you make sure that it is not going to hurt anybody if they bump into it, or whatever. That creation of this highly glossy commercial product is the opposite of making something personal. Things that are personal have flaws, they have vulnerabilities, if you don't see a vulnerability in somebody you are probably not relating with them on a very personal level. So it's the same with a game design. You know, making it was about "let me take my deepest flaws and vulnerabilities and put them in the game, and let's see what happens." (Jonathan Blow, creator of *Braid* in *INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE*, 2012)

Choosing for maximum profit is seen as 'selling out' (Whitson, 2011: p. 125). For indie developers (at least the traditional ones), being indie is about not being mainstream. It is about not making popular and cheap entertainment games. It is about making games that they (the indie developers and their fans) see as art or authentic, in which the indie developers can express themselves. Making games, from their love of games.

### 3.2 Authenticity

In the field of rock music, Hibbett states that indie separates good culture from popular culture (Hibbett, 2006: p. 58). In "Seeing is Believing", media professor Philip Auslander (1998) states that rock fans make a distinction between the *real rock music* and popular music. Despite not using the

term indie, there are clear parallels to be observed in the distinctions being made by Hibbett and Auslander: in both cases real or indie rock is about making high art instead of popular music. It is not about generating profit, but about creating art and cultural value. According to Auslander, consumers of rock music (the fans), judge music on its authenticity (of the music and the band) to decide whether it is real rock music. Therefore, I will argue in this chapter that this is also the case with regard to indie games.

Music scholars Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg state that, because of the numerous definitions authenticity has acquired over the years, a fixed definition of the concept does not exist (Weisethaunet, Lindberg, 2010: 481). It is a subjective concept, to which everyone will have his or her own interpretation. According to music scholar Johan Fornäs, the audience ascribes authenticity, as an attribute, to music. Authenticity has to be taken in regard to ‘how the textual structures are constructed to present themselves as related to the subjects that created them.’ (Fornäs, 1995: p. 274) For Fornäs, the connection between the author of a text and his or her work is the main point of focus. Through this connection will authenticity be revealed. This, however, has the consequence that every piece of music can always be experienced as authentic by a certain group of people (Moore, 2002: p. 220). Justin Bieber can cover a song of The Beatles<sup>27</sup> and fans of Bieber can experience that as authentic (while fans of The Beatles probably never will experience it that way). Authenticity points to the quality of the experience, but it also indicates a junction, in which different individuals agree that

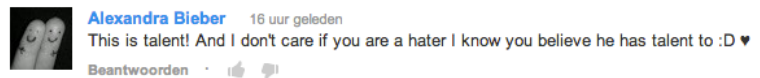


Figure 3. Justin Bieber fan  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7SwehyOh3c>



Figure 4. Justin Bieber critic.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7SwehyOh3c>

something can be regarded as authentic. It connects the fans. In this way a social-cultural power struggle is formed. In this struggle, different groups have different interpretations of authenticity and what thus can be regarded as authentic.

Auslander refers to socio-musicologist Simon Frith for his approach to the concept of authenticity. Authenticity, Frith argues, can partly be seen as inherent to the music and as an effect of ‘musical and extra-musical knowledge and beliefs.’ (Auslander, 1998: p. 4) Fans of The Beatles will not deem Bieber’s cover as authentic, as they know it is a cover of The Beatles. As shown in figure 4, one even states that Bieber ruined the song. The

<sup>27</sup> Video of Justin Bieber covering ‘Let it be’ by The Beatles:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7SwehyOh3c>

extra-musical knowledge that a fan possesses (in this case, knowing that The Beatles are the original artists), took the authenticity of the song away, making it non-authentic. To make this difference, the audience has to have a framework of reference of rock music in general. What one fan experiences as authentic, can be experienced as non-authentic by someone else. This again shows the social-cultural power struggle. Parallels can be found between indie rock and indie games. If something can be classified as an authentic experience will vary between genres (and the interpretation of these) and certain groups of people. Auslander notes that authentic rock music is being recognized and classified as such, when there are a number of specific basic elements to be found in the music by fans. This package of elements makes the difference for a fan to classify something as authentic.

This is similar for classifying games as indie. On the one hand certain groups of people classify games as indie on the basis of certain elements. For example, classifying games as indie based on nostalgic elements (Lipkin, 2012: p. 10) or focusing on game mechanics rather than graphics (Martin, Deuze, 2009: p. 281). For example, I would classify *The Cave* (2012), a 2D adventure platform game with simple controls, as indie, because these elements showcase a nostalgic style (although it has been published by Sega). In addition, the creative brains behind the game, developers Ron Gilbert and Tim Schafer, are famous for their platform games from the 90's, which also adds to the nostalgic experience. Here, a certain style is being associated with indie games. On the other hand, there is what Frith in the context of music, calls 'musical and extra-musical knowledge and beliefs.' (Auslander, 1998: p. 4) When applying this to the indie games industry, games can be classified on the basis of these types of knowledge and beliefs. For example: is a developer tied to a publisher? Who owns the IP rights? Or, how big is the game development team? These are all questions gamers can ask themselves when trying to classify a game as indie. Here, a certain political-economic position of a developer in the games industry is being associated with indie.

Authenticity in the context of music is ideological determined. Despite that music can be experienced as authentic by individuals, the basic elements, which the fan uses to classify music as authentic, are already social-cultural determined. The social-cultural background of the fan determines what is authentic and what is not authentic. In most cases these social-cultural conventions are somewhat irrational. In rock music, for example, cover bands could produce an exact copy of a piece of music from the original artists (which is experienced as authentic), but will not be experienced as authentic by the fans. In theory, the cover band copies the basic elements of the original artist, but misses a so-called *x-factor*. It becomes clear that authenticity is a

combination of basic elements apparent in the music and knowledge of musical and extra-musical facts. This means for indie games that mainstream developers and publishers can copy the style of indie developers, but the game may be not experienced as authentic or indie by the fan. For example, I would classify *The Cave* as indie, but other people can have a different opinion in this matter. Sega has published *The Cave*, and the graphics, although it is a 2D platform game, are very neat and seem high-end. These two things could be reasons for people to not classify the game as indie.

There are numerous definitions of authenticity, but what all these different definitions share is that they are exclusionary (Auslander, 2006: p. 4). Simply put, there is authentic rock and the rest (non-authentic rock, or pop (popular) music). It is not that the other music is *bad rock music*, it just is *not real*. 'The ideological distinction between rock and pop', Auslander states, 'is precisely the distinction between authentic and the inauthentic, the sincere and the cynical, the genuinely popular and the slickly commercial, the potentially resistant and the necessarily co-opted, art and entertainment.' (Auslander, 2006: p. 4-5) Or, as I would like to say in the context of the games industry, between indie and mainstream.

In the circuit of culture, classifying something as indie seems to be a dialogue between the developer and the audience (through the game and knowledge of the audience about the developer). However, in the next section I argue that it is also a dialogue between different members of the audience through, what Bourdieu calls, taste.

### 3.3 Taste

In *Legitimizing Television* (Newman, Levine, 2012) media academics Michael Newman and Elana Levine compare the old-fashion style of watching TV real-time (as in, when it is broadcasted) with the new practice of watching TV-shows online. They argue that the distinction between mass and class has changed with it. The distinction is now being made between the 'saps' and 'dipshits' who still watch live/real-time television and the people who watch the shows on demand. Halfway through the first decade of the 21st century, new discourses appeared, in which television, at least numerous new TV-shows (such as *The Wire*, *Homeland*, or *Breaking Bad* as opposed to *Dr. Phil* for example), was regarded as high art. This breaks with the older and more traditional discourses, in which television was placed hierarchically lower than literature, theater, and cinema. These new discourses of television's changing cultural value are trying to gain dominance in this hierarchy. Watching TV-shows in the convergence era, in which media technologies come together and blur

into one another (Newman, Levine, 2012: p. 4), is a practice more and more done on a computer or even a mobile device, while watching the traditional higher hierarchical placed movies more and more on TV's.

With the legitimation of TV, in the context of cultural value, the culture of ordinary people seems to have gained more respect from the *highbrow* elitists. Associations between mass culture and TV's broadcasting system are no longer set in stone. TV-shows are more and more regarded as art and can sometimes be associated with high art. Or, as Newman states: 'Taste cultures could be dissolving into a postmodern "nobrow" scenario, in which distinctions between high and low have collapsed.' (Newman, Levine, 2012: p. 6) In this scenario elitists (who traditionally have a highbrow culture) have now got more diverse and omnivorous tastes (resulting in the *nobrow* culture, which does not distinguish between highbrow and lowbrow), rather than excluding the popular. Newman and Levine continue this with stating that the first scenario (where the culture of ordinary people seemed to have gained more respect from the elitists) is an utopian believe. Rather, the elitists are using their omnivorous tastes to distinguish themselves from others, using different niches. Television in relation to cinema is no longer a distinction between low and high culture, but the distinction is made *within* a medium itself. For example: the division between Hollywood blockbuster movies versus art house or independent movies, instead of theater versus cinema. Distinctions within the games industry between indie and mainstream were not being made in the beginning of the industry. I would argue that as the games industry started out as a small cluster of developers and hobbyists, gaming was certainly was not regarded as mainstream. I would say that it was more of a distinction between playing games and watching television. Gaming was not mainstream, so mainstream games were not being put across of indie games. With the flourishing of the games industry it became obvious that, *within* the games industry as well, distinctions were made. On the one hand some games were considered mainstream, where other games could be described as indie. The mainstream game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is a well-known mainstream game, whereas the more obscure *Limbo* (Playdead, 2010) is considered an indie game.

Making such a distinction is a question of taste. Taste, at first sight, seems personal and product of a person's own reflection. But, to Newman and Levine, it is a product of a social-cultural struggle. In a society, the differences in taste function to reveal the dominant social culture, so that the relationships between classes will become visible. Newman and Levine refer to Bourdieu who states that with taste, the social order is etched into the human brain (Bourdieu, 1983). Taste, however, seems to deny that it is a product of society. Behind taste, there is a classification system to be found only partly visible to humans, who think that they determined their own taste. The

classification system determines what is authentic and not authentic through the social-cultural background of people (Newman, Levine, 2012: p. 5-6).

For Bourdieu, taste is being used to form frameworks around different classes. Within these frameworks, different identities are being reproduced. The different members of the class use points of reference regarding certain knowledge to identify themselves with other members of the class. For example: two people who love the same obscure band and cannot stop talking about it. This results in the formation of social groups, which use taste to include and exclude. Something or someone is included, so members of the class can identify themselves with this. Other things or people are excluded to preserve their identity in social groups. In this manner, members of a class can identify with each other, but, especially, they can dissociate themselves from other people outside of the social group (Newman, Levine, 2012: p. 6-7). Or, as Bourdieu puts it:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classification is expressed or betrayed (Bourdieu, 1983: p. 6)

The social-cultural backgrounds come together in classes, where the members of that class find each other in a framework through which they form identities. Players of indie games use their shared knowledge of games and developers to classify certain games as indie. It is important to note here that excluding games from their class is essential. In order to preserve their identity, the class needs to make the difference between what are good or indie games by deciding what are bad or mainstream games. The process of classifying becomes a subjective process. For different classes or groups of gamers, what is indie is decided in a different manner. For example: games with a certain style or games of developers with a specific position in the games industry. To define what indie exactly is, seems impossible. It is a dynamic concept, which, through means of cultural knowledge and taste, is used in many different ways to, in the first place distinguish between games (indie or not indie), but also to preserve the identity of certain social-cultural classes.

### *3.4 Conclusion*

The circuit of culture in the indie games industry, with regard to classifying something as indie, is a process of identification of the audience. The audience uses indie on the one hand to define what is authentic, and which games are indie or good, but on the other hand to identify themselves with

certain games and to distinguish themselves from other people. The circuit of culture is a dialogue between the developers and the audience (through the game itself and through extra knowledge of the games industry the audience has about developers and games) on the one hand and a dialogue between different classes of the audience on the other.

This chapter shows that defining indie seems practically impossible. It is a matter of taste. What one social group classifies as indie, can be classified as mainstream by another. There are no formal rules for classifying media as indie. The exclusion of mainstream media is of importance for classifying something as indie. Therefore, indie can be seen as the opposite of mainstream. This struggle between these two extremes is a struggle between different classes in society. Indie, from a cultural studies approach, is a dynamic concept, which thanks its existence to the constant struggle over the classification of indie between different classes.

In the next chapter, I will argue that these classes are used to determine target audiences for publishers. They use the identities formed through these classes as the characteristics for these target audiences, in order to enter new potential markets.



## 4. The Marketing of Indie

After analyzing the circuit of technology in chapter two and the circuit of culture in chapter three, I will research the circuit of marketing in this last chapter. How can something as complex as culture be used by publishers to market new products? In this chapter I will argue that the indie culture has become commodified (§4.1). Through this process of commodification, publishers and developers have created the possibility to manufacture authenticity and develop indie games themselves (§4.2). Consequently, publishers use indie as a new segment of the games market. As this chapter will show, the publishers do not classify something as indie in the games market per se. The audience will do that for them (§4.3).

During the 2013 edition of the E3, Microsoft, with the presentation of the Xbox One, somewhat neglected the indie developers. To publish on Xbox Live Arcade, indie developers were obliged to contractually tie themselves to a publisher (Narcisse, 2013). In the context of indie as a derivative of independent, indie developers had to give up their status of as an independent developer in order to publish games for the Xbox One. During this same event, Sony announced that this would not be necessary for indie developers on the new PlayStation (the PlayStation 4). Indie developers could self publish, as they desired. Sony even invited eight indie developers on stage to showcase their new games developed for the PlayStation 4. This showed the value Sony assigned to the indie developers; for Sony the indie developers were a part of the PlayStation 4.

In the second half of 2013, Microsoft came round and removed the requirement of having to be signed to publisher in order to publish on Xbox Live Arcade. Nevertheless, the damage seems to have been done. Many developers took Sony's side and planned to develop games for the PlayStation. This does not mean, however, that the games will not be published for the Xbox, but the games will be published for the PlayStation *first*. After that, developers can still decide, if they do not have an exclusivity contract<sup>28</sup> with Sony or are even bought by Sony, to publish on Microsoft's gaming system. For Sony and Microsoft it probably is not that big of a problem that developers eventually publish their games on other gaming platforms, but publishing games on one gaming platform *first* can mean more attention for that specific platform and maybe trigger people to buy the new PlayStation instead of the new Xbox. Even though the PlayStation games of the indie developers will (maybe) eventually be published on Xbox Live Arcade, the games were first

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<sup>28</sup> When a developer signs such a contract with, for example, Sony, the game they develop will only be available for the PlayStation. Sony will compensate the developer for this.

available for the PlayStation, meaning more attention on the market for the PlayStation. Therefore I argue that indie games are being used as a marketing ploy for the PlayStation.

Besides using indie games as a marketing ploy for their game platform, there is another reason Sony (and eventually Microsoft) gave attention to indie developers. The indie games industry is blooming. In principle, the manufacturers of the game platforms do not have to pay for the development of the games (although Sony, for example, also acts as an investor for developers, in order to get them to develop for the PlayStation). The game development side in the games industry is paying these development costs. The console manufacturers deliver the platform and, with the PlayStation Store and Xbox Live Arcade, act as distributors. As distributors, they also get a percentage of the games sold via those platforms. They want the developers to develop games for their platforms and they could give incentives to the developers to do just that. For example: a development kit for the PlayStation costs \$2,500. A big investment for a starting indie developer. To help these developers, but at the same time the popularity of the PlayStation, Sony helps the developers. They give out loans or give the development kit away for free (Campbell, 2013).

For PC games, the indie games industry has seen this kind of attention for a longer time. Through Steam's *Greenlight project* for example. Steam, an online software platform owned by Valve (a mainstream game developer), distributes and sells games (Valve's own games, but also numerous games from other developers). The platform does not simply allow any indie game onto the platform. However, with the growing number amount of indie games, Steam launched the Greenlight project. This project is a selection program with which indie developers can create attention for their game. If their game has acquired enough votes, the game will be released on the platform. These online distribution platforms, like Steam, PlayStation Store, or Xbox Live Arcade, are growing fast. Traditional retailers (game shops like the Dutch Game Mania) are being left out of the equation and indie developers can now publish the games themselves.

With the growing attention from, amongst others, Steam, Sony, and Microsoft, indie developers can showcase their games more and more to the (gaming) audience. However, with the growing attention, corporations like Sony are treading a new domain, which they treat like the, to them familiar, mainstream domains: targeting gamers by placing them in certain target demographics. The cultural value of games is being commodified. The launch of the indie category in the PlayStation Store means that indie is being treated like a genre (Gravereau, 2013). Indie here implies something about the game: a certain style for example. Such a category can be exploited. As we can conclude from the previous chapter, indie is a sign of authenticity being ascribed by fans. The 'big bad corporations' use indie as a genre, as if the games have certain elements in it, which tell

if a game can be seen as indie. This chapter shows how corporations like Sony commodify the indie culture to classify games as indie.

#### *4.1 Commodification, Or How Did We Get Here?*

How can it be that a cultural phenomenon, such as indie, is being treated like an industrial product? In *Digital Play*, Kline et al. (2003) argue that culture has become a commodity, although not a standardized one per se. The media academics begin with explaining how *Fordism* transitioned into *post-Fordism*. Fordism is a concept that describes the 'regime of accumulation' for capitalistic economic systems in the first three quarters of the last century. The concept knows three essential elements: workers work at assembly lines doing simple tasks, consumers were subjected to mass market strategies, and factory owners and the government made sure that the workers had enough money to spent as consumers. The factory owners raised wages and the government created a welfare state through regulations in the market. This resulted in economic growth and factory owners could raise the wages of their employees, who on their turn had a larger budget themselves for products of the (same) factories (Kline et al., 2003: p. 62).

Fordism, however, came in a crisis because of different factors 'including the saturation of mass markets, the discontent of assembly-line workers organized in powerful trade unions, new sources of competition (such as Japan), and the oil shocks of the 1970s.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 63) At the end of the Fordism ages, the computer made its entrance and brought with it a new form of capitalism: information capitalism. In a post-Fordism system, the simple, mechanical, assembly line has been replaced by flexible, computerized production. The industrial capitalism of the Fordism ages has been replaced by information capitalism. In the post-Fordism ages consumers are not being seen as a mass audience, but have become part of more customized and segmented niche markets. The regulation of the government, which was apparent in Fordism, is not so apparent anymore in the post-Fordism. The social benefits of Fordism 'have been eroded by privatization and deregulation and the creation of a state that is far more oriented towards promoting business interests and policing public order.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 64) Consumers no longer seem to be subjected to the mass-market strategies of Fordism. In the field of (indie) games, the computerization is very apparent. After all, games are made on computers, to be played on computers. In the games industry, games have been divided into different genres, and, even though most development teams exist out of multiple developers, games *can* be developed by only one. Resulting in what essentially are one-man factories.

With the demise of Fordism, Kline et al. see the rise of post-Fordism and with that, the *postmodernization* of culture. Fordism was paired with certain modernistic cultural styles: 'Solidity, progress, and standardization.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 69) In postmodernism, however, nothing has a stable foundation. Kline et al. state that 'in the postmodern condition the implosion of illusion and authenticity creates, it has been argued, a floating, foundationless world. Everything is surface and nothing depth. Increasingly, the playful sign-world of media culture disconnects history, needs, social roles, and rationality from any definite grounding. Reality disintegrates into an ever shifting, recursive, and cross-referencing kaleidoscope world of lifestyles, language games, and entertainment. Identities and meaning are ceaselessly subverted by the apprehension - corrosively nihilistic or whimsical and playful - not so much that nothing is as it seems as that seeming is all there is.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 69) Everything in the media world gets disconnected from its original meaning and reality is no longer what it seems to be. Kline et al. refer to Baudrillard's theory of *simulacrum* (Baudrillard, 1973). Baudrillard argues that the increasingly omnipresent media clouds our ability to distinguish fact from fiction (Kline, et al., 2003: p.69). We therefore enter, what Baudrillard calls, a *hyperreality*, where digital enhanced photographs can have the same effect of reality as an analog photograph. Games are also a good example of this. In *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, for example, the war zones designed in the game are based on real-life war zones, like Afghanistan or Iraq. Sporting games are also good examples. Games like *Fifa '14* or *Shift 2: Unleashed* try to recreate the sports as close to reality as they can. Reality and fiction are flowing here into one another.

The postmodernization of our society is also about 'supercharged cultural commodification.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 70) The cultural symbols in the hyperreality are becoming commodities. Commodities are no longer objects, but also sources of meaning. For example: people use them to identify themselves and to distinguish them from others. People use the commodities to state what kind of person they are and what position they have in a society. Publishers, and in particular the marketing department, anticipate on this phenomenon. Kline et al. state that marketing is concept 'what synchronizes economic imperatives and cultural change.' (Kline, et al., 2003: p. 71) It connects the product to the consumer through cultural symbols. The taste of the audience is being used to sell certain products to them, which meets their needs. For indie games this means that indie as a culture is being commodified. The cultural symbols are used as elements to classify games as indie. Nostalgic elements, such as the 2D platform style in *The Cave*, a focus on game mechanics rather than graphics, simple controls (IndieGames.com, 2012), etc., can be implemented in the game design.

## 4.2 Disconnected

The biggest challenge for corporations in the games industry, such as Sony, which comes with developing indie games, is to recreate the authenticity the fans of indie games expect to be in the games. There are, however, also indie developers who do not pursue to create that authenticity. For example: the new group of social and mobile game developers Whitson (2012) referred to in her article. Martin and Deuze speak of a *disconnect* in the indie game industry. There are, despite the utopian ideology of the indie culture, many successful independent game developers who copy popular games (from the mainstream culture) (Martin, Deuze, 2011: p. 288). The members of the audience, who apply their notion of indie authenticity on the game, will then answer the question of whether these games can be regarded as indie games.

Jones et al. note two strategies to claim authenticity (Jones, et al., 2005: p. 893). First, authenticity can be claimed through working within the framework of traditional, canonical titles and copy their style. In the case of indie games, this would mean to copy the style of popular indie games to justify its authenticity. An example of this is *The Cave*, in which a nostalgic 2D platform style is being used (a style that in *INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE* (2012) was seen as inspiration for many indie developers). Jones et al. call this *manufactured authenticity*.

Secondly, authenticity can be claimed through originality and operating from a distinct approach. In this way, the unique creative power of an entity (the developers in the games industry for example) can be seen in the game and create a *creative voice*. The game *Journey* was acclaimed to be a product of this distinct creativity, for example in its communication with other players (who can randomly appear in your game). Players can only communicate by 'pinging' each other. No chat box, no voice communication, only a ping (Eisenbeis, 2013). For fans, such a distinct style can be a reason to classify the game as an indie game, despite the developer being tied to a publisher. Publishers then, can use this style to define a new genre and cater to this new market.

## 4.3 Indie As A Market Segment

In "The Winner Takes All", Nieborg (2011) states that contemporary game publishers are hit-driven (Nieborg, 2011: p. 4). In the second chapter of this thesis it became clear that only a small number of games generate the biggest portion of profits. From this perspective, the hit-driven nature of publishers seems logical; aiming for hits is aiming for the highest return on investment. Publishing games has a certain risk to it: not every game will return its investment. To Kerr, the primary

reason behind this is an irrational one. Fashion and style play a big role for consumers when purchasing a game and so the consumers are unpredictable (Kerr, 2006: p. 45). The high development costs of games are the reason the risk is so high. Nieborg states that, despite the high risk, publishers still invest in games because it still pays off (Nieborg, 2011: p. 5). It is a 'controlled gamble' the publishers and investors take, because, it can, after all, still generate a high profit.

If game publishers want to generate profit, they have to experiment with new technology and titles (i.e. new IP's) besides exploiting older, successful titles and franchises. Publishers will be very selective in deciding which game to publish. Nieborg states that 'to be profitable in the next-gen era, a game publisher has to show tremendous restraint in the number of games a company releases and the publisher has to be highly disciplined in managing its portfolio.' (Nieborg, 2011: p. 7) A lot of market research will be necessary for publishers to find out which games will have the biggest chance to succeed. The to-be-published games can be older successful titles, but with a new story or look for example (think of the *Call of Duty* franchise), or fresh new titles. Nieborg sees this as 'the balancing act of diversification versus standardization and of rationalization versus innovation.' (Nieborg, 2011: p. 7) Consequently, publishers, generally, aim to publish one title for each genre. Franchises can be further exploited and if a new title gets published, this can fill up an empty spot in a certain genre. Genres, then, are 'clearly defined markets with their own demographic and potential revenue.' (Nieborg, 2011: p.9)

The game publishers divide the games industry in different segments (genres) and aim to fill these segments with their games to acquire as high a share of the market as possible. I argue that indie games as a genre has become such a segment. It is a growing industry and the publishers will want to get their piece of the new market. In the previous chapter I argued that indie gamers classify games as indie or authentic through their social-cultural background. The classes in which the indie fans find themselves form a certain demographic: a demographic in which people have the same expectations of what makes a game indie. Publishers can respond to these expectations with new titles. Certainly, when the expectations rely heavily on certain stylistic elements (for example, in a nostalgic 2D platform game). With the high risk of producing games taken into account, publishers will want to invest in games, which have proven to be successful with these elements. This shows the manufactured authenticity. Publishers will want to meet the expectations of a market segment to reach as large an audience as possible. Sega, for example, chose to invest in *The Cave*. Despite being published by a publisher, the game was certainly classified as indie by certain audience (because of certain stylistic elements)<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> A review of the game can be found here: <http://indiehaven.com/the-cave-review/>

As the audience ascribes the degree of authenticity (or, in other words: the degree of indie) to a game, the connection between the developers and their audience is very important. With the rise of digital distribution, this connection seems to have strengthened (Martin, Deuze, 2011: p. 289). According to the Oxford Dictionary, marketing means ‘the action or business of promoting and selling products or services, including market research and advertising.’<sup>30</sup> It means bringing a product to the market and getting people to buy the products. The market in the games industry is the audience; the market of consumers (Mosco, 1996: p. 137). This audience has, because of the ascribed authenticity, certain expectations of what an indie game entails. The publishers and developers have to respond to these expectations. Marketing helps them to deliver the response to the expectations through, for example, advertising and connecting with the audience on game forums. As authenticity on the one hand can be seen in elements of the game, but is on the other hand also based on the extra knowledge of games the gamer possesses (for example, who is the developer or which party holds the IP rights?), corporations have to answer with a story behind the production process. Mainstream developers can copy certain elements of successful indie games, but the extra knowledge of games, that the audience possesses, is not implementable. To Simon, provenance, hence, is very important for classifying games as indie: ‘While indie can refer to a discrete visual or design style it more often refers to the provenance of the game; to those who made it and the specific conditions under which it was made and distributed.’ (Simon, 2011: p. 2) This applies to indie games (does the developer operate independent from a publisher?), but also to mainstream games. For the latter category, the name of a developer could indicate a certain quality of a game. The logo of Blizzard (a big mainstream developer) printed on the cover of a game means for the fans of Blizzard that the game, probably, has certain stylistic elements in it. Developers, both indie and mainstream, will have to meet certain expectations of their fans. To be classified as indie, the audience will judge the game on its provenance (and certain game elements).

#### *4.4 Conclusion*

What started out as a domain occupied by independent developers is now a domain that has also become part of the games industry controlled by (big) publishers. These publishers recognized a new market in indie games, and started to give more and more attention to the growing industry. In order to develop indie games, publishers have to manufacture a certain indie authenticity.

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<sup>30</sup> The definition of ‘marketing’ in the Oxford Dictionary:  
<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/marketing?q=marketing>

Postmodernism has also found its way into the games industry. Indie games are no longer (solely) a statement against the mainstream games industry. The indie games industry has become a hyperreality, where the cultural symbols of indie gaming have become commodities. The fans of indie games no longer only form a protest against the mainstream, but are in the eyes of publishers a new demography of a new market, ready to be exploited. Hence, it seems that in the circuit of marketing, indie has become a genre, a style with certain elements. Publishers can choose to copy the style of indie games and develop their own indie games. In this manner, they copy the indie authenticity of the original indie games and manufacture their own. From the publishers and mainstream developers perspective, indie has become a dynamic style, with certain expectations from a demography. This is a new market for them. In the circuit of marketing, publishers do not have to classify games as indie, the indie fans will do that for them, and the publishers are happily to meet those expectations if that will generate more profit.



## Conclusion

The indie games industry is an industry that began as a product of a cluster network of developers operating independent from publishers: the indie developers. Over the years, the indie domain has gotten more and more attention from developers and publishers in the mainstream domain. Especially Sony saw the importance for the, to them, new market and showed their support to the indie developers during the E3 conference of 2013. The big publisher EA saw possibilities in the indie games industry as well. They published for example the *Indie Bundle*, a bundle of indie games. Indie used to mean that the developers operated independent from publishers, but EA does not seem to abide that unwritten rule and published a bundle of indie games nevertheless.

This thesis answered the question: which forces classify what indie is in the games industry and how do they do that? To answer this question I used the method of Critical Media Analysis, which focuses on the impact of media on the distribution of power in society. I structured this thesis following Kline et al.'s multidimensional framework of three circuits: technology, culture, and marketing. Indie is classified through the interplay of these three circuits.

The first chapter discusses the origin of indie. It is an introductory chapter to the following three and I argue that on the one hand indie signifies a certain mode of production (independent from a publisher). On the other hand, in the last two chapters it will become clear that indie also signifies an ideology and market for a new genre of games.

In the second chapter I argue that with the flourishing of indie games a new industry emerged with it: the indie games industry. The indie games industry has grown up and became more professional. It also saw the rise of a new group of independent developers: developers in the social and mobile market. This new group, which generally has a different background and cultural milieu than the more traditional indie developer, does not necessarily share the same ideologies as the more traditional indie: prioritizing cultural value over profit. Through new technological advancements, the process of self-publishing has become much easier for independent developers. Originally, indie developers started out as hobbyists, but currently, they are professionalizing and the once clear distinction (either independent from a publisher or not) has become blurred. The indie games industry is playing an increasingly bigger role in the greater games industry. Indie developers use indie to indicate a certain mode of production, a more flexible, autonomous, developer able to express his own creativity instead of the mainstream developer, who can be regarded as a part of a fixed, hierarchical system. These indie developers then follow a certain ideology, a certain process of developing games. New developers, with different backgrounds than

the traditional indie developers, create a more diverse landscape in the indie games industry. Developers classify a certain mode of production (namely independent from publishers) as indie, but with the growing diversification of the indie games industry, its getting harder and harder to make a clear distinction between indie and mainstream developers.

For the third chapter I researched how the audience classifies games as indie. Whether a game is classified as indie, is dependent on certain elements in the game (the audience ascribes authenticity to these elements) and the extra knowledge of games (the position of the developer in the games industry for example, which can be classified as indie). However, the audience classifies from a certain social-cultural background, which determines the taste of the audience. The audience uses indie on the one hand to distinguish good or authentic games (seen as a product of high art culture) from popular, or mainstream games, which are perceived as media with lesser cultural value. On the other hand, the audience uses indie to identify oneself with a better culture, but maybe more important to distinguish oneself from others (who identify themselves with, in the eyes of said person, an inferior culture). Indie is ideological and used for social differentiation. The audience is divided in different classes, that each has its own definition and standards of what indie means. Indie game fans use indie to distinguish high art from mainstream games, but also to differentiate themselves from other classes and members of those classes.

In the fourth chapter I argued that the indie culture has become commodified. The domain that started as a realm of hobbyists saw the entry of mainstream publishers. Publishers use indie as a genre, a new market with a certain demographic. By copying the game elements that the audience use to classify the game as indie, the publishers try to manufacture the authenticity in the games they publish. The publishers hence use the audience (or market demographic) to classify indie for them; they simply react to the expectations of the audience.

To state that indie games are mere products of developers operating independent from a publisher is too simple. In this thesis I argued that indie is being classified through the interplay of three forces in the games industry: the developers, the publishers, and the audience. The indie games industry is becoming more and more intertwined with the games industry, 'owned' by big corporations. Here, developers can operate independent from publishers, but there are also independent developers who do not necessarily share the same ideology of what indie developer is as the more traditional developers. The audience also has its own ideology behind indie. For the audience, indie separates high art games from mainstream games, and it differentiates themselves from other classes. Publishers use these ideologies to identify new markets. The indie culture has

become commodified and publishers use the expectations, from the audience, of what indie is to create a new market.

The Critical Media Analysis method proved to be a good research method for identifying the different forces that classify what indie is in the games industry. However, using this method, the forces themselves did not get their voice heard, through, for example, interviews. Researching literature is one thing, but learning how the different forces classify indie by interviewing members of the audience, developers, and publishers would be very fruitful, as they are operating in the field instead writing about the field (as the academics do). For further research I would advise to critically analyze the visions or statements of the developers, audience, and publishers themselves, to learn how they classify indie. To take this a step further, it could be interesting to study indie culture across all media. I briefly touched this idea in chapter three, *The Audience of Indie*. In this manner, indie is seen as a cultural movement, which may reveal common traits in the production and marketing aspects of all indie media.

It seems the inevitable has happened: postmodernism has found its way into the indie games industry. The flourishing of the once hobbyist domain bottled the interest of the publishers. A new market, with new opportunities for generating profit through the commodification of cultural symbols, shows how far the indie culture has transgressed from the traditional ideology: making games the publishers will not publish. Generating cultural value instead of profit. The diverse field of the definition of indie will continue to expand, losing touch with its roots: the independent developers.

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